

INDIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE THROUGH WESTERN EYES

—ARVIND P. DAVE

It would be clear to anyone from the facts given in this article that the Westerners have still stuck to Rudyard Kipling's assertion that "East is East and West is West." Yet they want to study the "just so stories" with Indian background, but with Kipling's eyes! However, there still prevails a sort of cultural superiority of being the white, and their sneer at the Eastern Black is deeply felt by the third world people.

One has yet to see and experience how much closeness the events like the Festival of India and International Book Fairs would bring and to what extent they would lead to the real understanding about India

and help them give up their prejudices against the East and free them of their complexes about the White and the Black.

Besides, could any reasonable person in India believe that the doubt still prevails in the world about the intellectual and cultural development of India after Independence? I have witnessed the Westerner's aversion to the Eastern intellectuals and their negative approach towards the third world. However, in India, one cannot say with certainty that regionalism and casteism have decreased among the intellectuals and the cultured people.

I quote here some examples which are self-explanatory and many positive thinkers would agree that our cultural ambassadors have not been able to raise the Indian image too high in the Western world. I and my friend Prof. Perry Nodelman, Professor of English, University of Winnipeg, Manitoba, had the following correspondence :

Prof. Nodelman : " . . . Quite frankly, the vast majority of our members just aren't all that interested in children's literature in India . . . India is too far away and circumstances are too different from here in North America for your experience to be of much immediate use in our dealing with students and children . . . I do not think we have something to learn from the way people like yourself handle children . . . some humility about the limitations of our experience, if nothing else." My reply was : "Sir, whenever I receive any letter from an honourable member, I feel one with the total atmosphere instilled in the letter. I sometimes become an American, or a Canadian or a French and when I finish (reading) it, I once again become an Indian. Nearness or distance should not come in our way as the supersonic transport has minimised the distances among the nations. On the contrary, we should evolve an approach to the world's children literature to bring closeness among us for the

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mutual benefit for the writers, and through us, the world's children should benefit. If we won't try hard today, how are we to bring lasting peace on this earth at a later date? . . . My request to you is only for the reason that the people at large believe that India is a land of poverty stricken people, there is no education . . . as if they have just come out of jungle! But it is not so. We have enormous spiritual strength."

Prof. Nodelman: "Yes, I agree. Too many people in this continent do think of India as a poverty-stricken land with no real culture. I encourage you to teach us better by writing the yearly round up (for the Children's Literature Association quarterly, Eastern Michigan).

In another incident, one of the editions of Children's Book review in England wrote to me last year while commenting on one of the modern Indian children's classics for the age-group of 10 plus, which I had sent to the editor along with my viewpoint in the book said: ". . . I let one of my reviewers have the copy of the book you sent, and his note appeared in our December 1984 issue, as we have found that when we import books, the librarians reject them because of poor production, no matter how good the story. The hard wear that children give them means that they do not last long enough."

The letter of the editor shows the Westerner's materialistic attitude which does not see the worth of the story which has a healing effect on the minds, of the children and instills high value of love, sympathy, peace and international brotherhood.

The book review of *The Forbidden Sea* by Marcus Crough reads: "I bought my first Indian children's book in Calcutta in 1943. They were uniformly dreadful in those days, and physically, judged by this Thomson Press Production, they have not made progress in forty years. In approach and in literary quality, however, *The For-*

bidden Sea does not lag far behind the average products of Western publishers. The story of how Abu ran away to seek his fortune after his father is lost at sea, and how he returns with fortune in pearls to rescue his mother and sister from poverty, may lack plausibility, but it is told with some pace and with a disarming simplicity. Best of all, it conveys the terror and the beauty of the sea in restrained terms. Tara Ali Baig deserves something a good deal better than these indifferent illustrations, shoddy paper and already disintegrating casing which are likely to restrict her books to the Indian market. Here too, the review speaks of the Western materialistic approach and not of the essentially Indian spiritual value which the book emphasizes. Herein lies the difference between the first world and the third world.

The editor did not publish my view along with the above book review. What I had written was primarily meant to provide a comparative critical evaluation in order to create true understanding between the West and the East. But the sophisticated Westerners would not be able to understand Eastern spiritualism until they discard their materialistic values.

The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature (Oxford University Press, 1984) has given the following incorrect and misleading details about literature for children and young adults in India: "The history of children's literature in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is very difficult to trace in any detail, largely due to the fact that so many languages and traditions are involved." This is not true, because, before 1947, Pakistan as a whole, was part of India and Bangladesh came into existence only in 1971. How could the English be so indifferent to India where they ruled for more than 150 years and pioneered in setting up new traditions?

There are 16 constitutionally recognized

languages in India, and not 17 as stated in the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (hence forth referred to as the *Companion*): "India today has a total of 17 officially recognized languages besides Hindi and English." This means 19 constitutionally recognized languages. Again, there are as many as 1652 dialects in India according to the *Times of India Who's Who* and not 200 as stated by the compilers.

It has been authentically stated by Dr. Prabhashanker Teraiya of the Saurashtra University, Rajkot, that there fairies do not belong to the culture of India. In his view, "the fairies must have been brought to India from the Arabian countries...as they have fairies in their literature. Or, the fairies must have been brought to India either by the English or the French or the Portuguese. India has only *rakshasas* (demons) and *dakins* (witches)."

The authors of the *Companion* have borne in mind the Grimm Brothers' observation that folktales traditionally told are original and true literature in the world. When the art of telling folktales dies, the whole culture would also sooner or later die, because folklore is the foundation of the cultural development of any country.

India has ancient Sanskrit scriptures and our sages used to impart knowledge to their disciples in their hermitages in forests. The modern form of that type of educational institutions are *Lok Shalas* and post-Basic Schools.

The British consolidated their political hold over India in 1817. In its wake came the School Book Society which was limited to Bengal. The statement by the compilers of the *Companion* about the wide readership of Mrs. Sherwood's *Pious Stories* translated into Hindi is hard to accept, because the speed of primary education in India really started in the last quarter of the 19th century and Hindi was not then taught in schools. Besides illiteracy was

very high in those days. However, Aesop's *Fables* were available in Gujarati and other Indian languages even before 1850.

The *Companion* refers to Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar and Bengali literature and M.S. Puttanna, the Kannada writer. There are passing references to Rabindranath Tagore's tales and songs, Jogindranath Sarkar's *Hashi Khushi* and animal stories, Maulvi Nazir Ahmed's Urdu stories and Maulvi Mohmed Ahmed's Urdu school books. The rest is left out, as if there was nothing else worth mentioning about Indian children's literature! Had they referred to Dr. Jamuna's *Children's Literature in Indian Languages* (Publications Division, Government of India, 1982), they would have found a lot more to say about children's literature in India in the *Companion*. They have also ignored Kazi Nazrul Islam, Ghulam Mostafa Jassimuddin, Gijubhai Badheka and many other important children's writers in India.

According to Dr. Jamuna, Assamese children's literature dates back in 1449, Bengali to 1818, Gujarati to 1828, Hindi to 800 A.D. and Marathi to 570 A.D. Children's literature in Malayalam can be traced back to the 18th century, Oriya to the 16th century. Tamil children's literature goes back to 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. In contrast, children's literature in English in India came only after the establishment of the three universities or at the most during the period of the decline of the Mughal empire when the British started annexing different regions of the country and children's literature in English started coming to India along with English school books for the children of the Indian elites. The English missionaries added to that influx of children's books in English. But in any case, it is incorrect to say that children's literature in the modern sense became known to Indian children only in 1814 with Mrs. Sherwood's *Pious Stories*.

As for children's magazines, the oldest magazine, *Digdarshana* first appeared in 1818, followed by *Pashvabali* (1828), *Jnanodaya* (1831), *Satyapradip* (1860) *Abodh Ba* (1875). The Marathi Children's magazine *Anand* was started in 1906. According to the *Press in India*, 1977, Part II, there were 161 children's magazines in India with a total circulation of 17,78,091 at the end of 1977. The compiler of the *Companions* have glossed over this fact. They have even ignored one of the most popular, multilingual, children's magazine, *Indrajaal Comics* (a Times of India Publication), multi-lingual *Chandamama* and other magazines that enjoy wide popularity among Indian children. Among them are the *Parag* and the *Nandan* in Hindi, the *Anand* in Marathi, the *Phoolwadi* in Gujarati, the *Children's World* and the *Target* in English and many others.

The Kaziranga Trail and *Blind Witness* by Arup Kumar Dutta, *The Chandipur Jewels* by Nilima Sinha, *Letters to the Daughter* by Jawaharlal Nehru, *Indrani and the Enchanted Jungle* and *The Forbidden Sea* by Tara Ali Baig, *Dee Kay and the Mystery of Laughing Natraj* by Jaqueline Singh. *A Wave of Fury* by K.A. Andalam, *Robin and the Hawk* by C.N. Bulsara, *The Story of Buddha* by Jonathan Landaw; *Folktales from India* and *Fairy Tales from India*, *Aesop's Fables*, *More Stories from Panchtantra*, *Tales from India*, *More Stories from Arabian Nights* by Vernon Thomas, *Tales from Indian Mythology* and *Tales from Indian Classics* by Rupa Gupta, *More Legends from Northern India* and *Legends from Northern India* by Nipla Hasija, *The Wise Fool* by Priti Ghosh, *Valour and Romance from Rajasthan* by Pritish Nandy and so on.

As for the oldest writers, Dr. Annie Besant and Dr. Ruth Robinson, an American missionary, have not been mentioned at all in the *Companion*. They had written pro-

fusely for Indian children during 1919 to 1937.

Besides, the compilers have not made any mention of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, established in 1981 at New Delhi, which was in full swing by 1984. Yet another omission is Dr. K.K. Roy's *Multi-cultural Literature*. Besides, Thomson Junior Library, the Christian Literature Association at Madras have also been left out. There is also no mention of India Book House, or Children's Book Trust, Ratna Bharati or National Book Trust, or National Council of Educational Research & Training Publications and many more publishers of the children's books have been left out the *Oxford Companion*!

It is all the more surprising that the compilers have ignored the following writers and their titles which were once very popular in India which needs special mention as they have been traced out by me from the Commonwealth Institute in my primary findings of the History and development of children's Literature in English in India:

Baker Olaf—*Shasta of the Wolves*—London 1921, Betty Sibella — *Bengali School-days*, *Chand's Little Sister*—London: Central Board of Mission 1920, *David's Bond*—London Zenith Press 1935, *Gems from the Mine*—London—Church of England zenana Mission Society 1929, *The Grey Squirrel*—A Story Founded on Indian Myth—London Zenith Press 1947, *The Kamini Bush-Story of Bengal*—London Church Missionary Society 1925, *The Priceless Jewel*—London—Church of England Zenana Mission Society 1925, *Romani's Daughter*—A Story of India London Zenith Press 1933, *The Taming of Ambo*—London—SPCK 1924, *Topsy's Day*—*The Story of Bengali Child*—London SPCK 1922, *The Two Shilling Baby*—London—Zenith Press 1936, Bose Irene — Totaram—*The Story of a Village Boy in India*—N.Y. Macmillan 1933, Brereton F.S.

—A Hero of Lucknow—London—Blackie 1905, *Jone's of the 64th*—London—Blackie 1907, *With Roberts to Candhar* — London—Blackie 1906, Budden J.A.—*The Further Adventures of Jungle John* — London—Longman 1929 and *Jungle John*—London—Longmans 1927. Cotes Mrs Everard—*Vernon's Aunt-Experiences of Miss Lovonia Moffat*—London—Chatto and Windus 1894, Dalton William—*The Next Hunters*—London Arthur Hall 1863, *Phaulcon the Adventurer*—London Breton—1881, Douglas O. Olivia in India—*The Adventures of a Chota Sahib* — London Burns Oates 1934,—*Poisoned Arrow*—London—Burnes Oates 1934, Eyton J.S. Bulbulla—London—Arrowsmith 1928, *Expectancy*—London—Arrowsmith 1928, *Jungle Born* — Arrowsmith — 1924, *Kullu of the Carts*—London Arrowsmith 1926, Fraser W.A.—*The Saisada Tales*—London.

David Nitt 1905, Gibbon F.P.—*The Disputed V.C.* — London — Blackie 1903, *Prisoners of the Gurkhas* — London — Routledge 1903, *With Rifle and Kukri* — London — Religious Tract Society 1910, Grover J.P. — *The Duke's Own* — London — Griffith — 1887, Hales A.G. *The Glusky in India* — London — John Long 1930, *The Taming of Tarm* — London — Nesbit 1914, *Billy and The Boy* — London — Humphrey Milford — 1920, *The Cave of Hanuman* — London — Sheldon Press 1929, *Chinna* — London — Wella Gardner 1924, *Little Prince Tota* — London — Sheldon Press 1930, *The Little Rajah* — London — T. Nelson 1922, *Louisa* — London — Wells Gardner 1927, *The Sleeping City* — London — Wells Gardner — 1932, *The Little Wanderers* — London — Humphrey Milford 1924, Kent L.A. — *The Red Rajah* — N.Y. Houghton Mifflin 1933, Kingston W.H. — *Adventures in India* — London Routledge 1883, Methley V.M. — *Three for Luck* — London — Prilgrim Press 1921, Mudaliar

C.T. — Parthasarathi — *Bhima: The Giant Killer* — Madras — Macmillan 1926, Rousset L — *The Serpent Charmer* — N.Y. Scribner 1980, Sherwood (Mrs.) — *Little Henry and His Bearer* — London 1836 (1814 the First Ed.), Weston Christine — *Bhimsa* — N.Y. Scribners 1945. I request the Government of India to collect the old and out-of-print books and house them in a Children's Literature Research Institute which should be established in India.

Besides, the *Companion*, does not include the above mentioned books by Brerton F.S. In the same way, *Adventures in India* by Kingston W.H.C. is not included. Nor *Epics* from Bankim have been included. When India is taking leadership on the world platform through NAM, the *Companion* cannot ignore the above facts which could have been easily obtained the authors had they made a little effort: or is it out of their sheer sense of superiority and the Western materialism that they ignore these facts?

This *Companion* would surely create a very wrong impression among the foreign readers and in the academic institutions who wish to know more about literature for children's and young adults' in India. Historical details and facts should not have been twisted thus or totally ignored. My experience with the International Organisations of the United Nations related to this field is very disappointing. It is my impression that by 'International' they mean only Western countries and America in which Japan has established its sound foothold. My experience with the International Institute for Children's Literature and Reading Research at Vienna and IBBY Head Quarters and Switzerland disappointing. The obvious reason is that the Central Government at Delhi does not know this and takes no interest in this field.

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As a critic of children's literature in India I believe that the house of long standing with high reputation like Oxford should withdraw the book from circulation and reprint it with the facts and figures relating to Indian sub-continent with the help of some scholars from India who have studied the children's literature. I would like to state that the above mentioned shortcomings of the *Companion* are only a small part of the details gathered in my primary findings of the history of children's literature in English in India.

From the above, an unintentioned comparison brings to an interesting fact that

American viewpoint is positive, receptive and understanding whereas the English point of view about Indian cultural development as a whole is quite negative.

Such misquotations, misinformation and false details relating to Indian children's Literature in the Western book of reference could greatly damage or distort India's image and for that the Government of India should create a special study cell to keep a watchful eye on the foreign books containing fake details about India!

NOTE: The above article is the part of research project — History and development of Children's Literature in English in India by Arvind P. Dave.